

# BULGARIAN MONASTERIES

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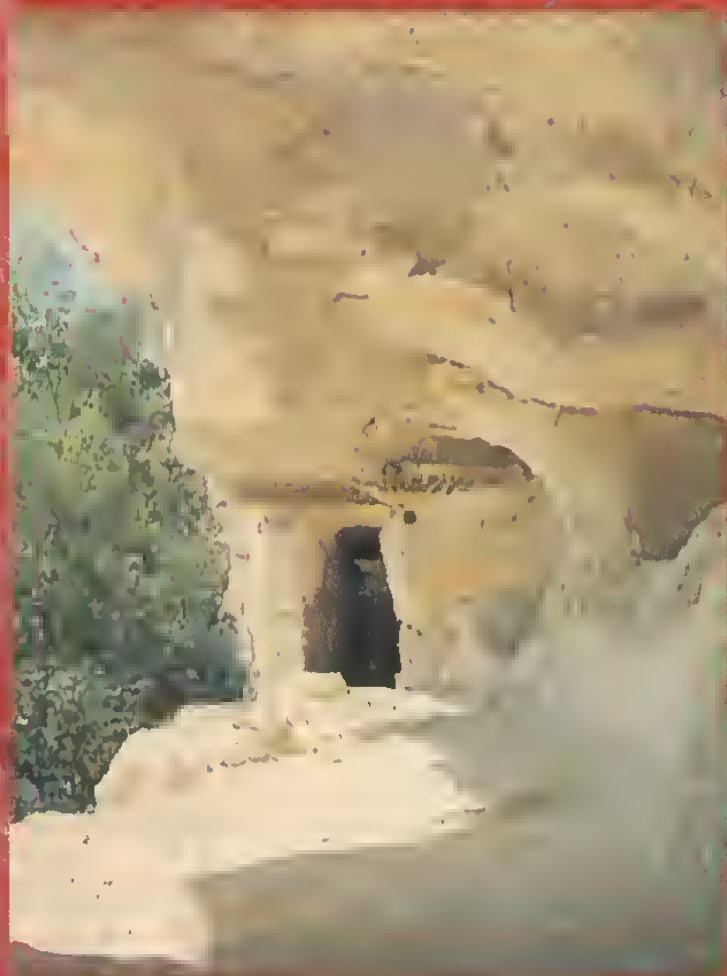
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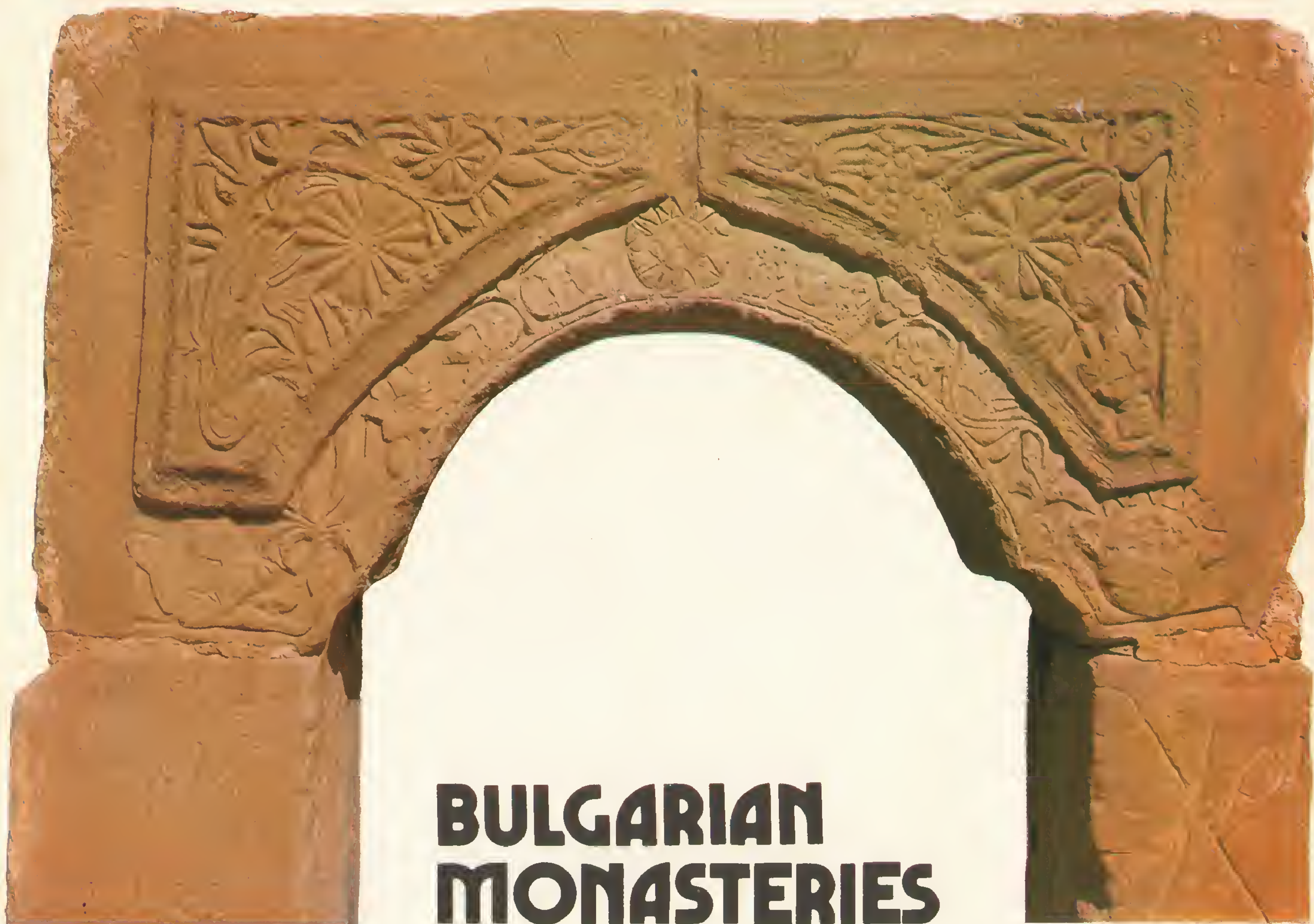
THE TRICLAV MONASTERY











# **BULGARIAN MONASTERIES**

FATE, ART, PERSONALITIES  
THE FATE OF THE NATION, MEN OF GENIUS, AND  
THE MONASTERIES  
A SACRED PLACE  
THREE AMONG THE TOP  
MASTERPIECES OF ARCHITECTURE AND ART  
ALONG THE TRACKS OF HISTORY



# FATE, ART, PERSONALITIES





It is impossible to understand the history and nature of Bulgarian monasteries, their place in the nation's consciousness without knowing more of the historic fate of the nation itself. Ever since they came into existence, monasteries in Bulgaria were something more than just ecclesiastical formations or sheltered places for escaping from worldly life, and for religious extasy.

The establishment of Christianity in Bulgaria during the 9th century represented in fact the establishment of Bulgaria herself. Firstly, at home - as a spiritual and cultural entity; secondly - among the great European claimants to authority, glory and power. Monasteries, too, were amongst the means towards these objectives but they were means in the service of philosophers, writers and philologists. Not simply a religion, but a whole culture was to be forged behind the monastery walls. It turned later into a self-confidence capable of preserving the substance of a nation in the course of five centuries of foreign rule.

Therefore, if we say that monasteries are centres of literature and enlightenment, temples of art and monuments of architecture, it will be true, but it will not cover all. Very soon after their emergence in the Bulgarian lands, fate decided it that they should stand in the frontline of political conflicts which, in the Middle Ages, had but one outcome: one of the conflicting sides was crushed or enslaved by the other... And Bulgaria's rival was none other but Byzantium. It is quite natural that

monasteries where both the script and literature of the Bulgarian people were created, centred the nation's innermost hopes and aspirations. Therefore, it would not be exaggerated to say that the history of Bulgarian monasteries is in its essence political history. Starting with their struggle to establish the Slavonic script and culture; passing through their role as fortresses against the Byzantian oppressor (11th - 12th century), and ending with the tragic but valiant annals recorded not only by the monasteries but by the entire people during the centuries of Ottoman rule (14th - 19th century); theirs is a chronicle of the greatest trials Bulgaria had faced.

Therefore, all that should be named «monastery culture» or «culture created in the monasteries», is, in fact, an organic part of a genuinely national culture, of the culture created by the people.

#### THE FATE OF THE NATION, MEN OF GENIUS, AND THE MONASTERIES

When Bulgaria adopted the Christianity Prince Boris (852-889) who considered monachism useful for purely State interests, built solid monasteries and churches inspiring respect and a sense of security, first in the capital city of Pliska and near it.

The second Christian ruler, the youngest son of Boris I, Tsar Simeon (893-927), erected the new capital of Preslav, and founded monasteries in quiet and remote places thus

creating perfect conditions for the activities of writers, theologians and philologists with whom the enlightened monarch - one of the most learned men of those times - populated the monasteries.

The monasteries were to hammer out the foundations of the future cultural and spiritual community. The new Slavonic - Bulgarian literature alone could become its strongest alloy.

Round about 886, Prince Boris I accommodated the disciples of Cyril and Methodius, the creators of the Slavonic-Bulgarian letters, at St. Panteleimon's Monastery built upon his orders near Preslav. Thus the first Old-Bulgarian School of literature, known as the Pliska-Preslav School, was established. Its first objectives included preparations for the introduction of the Slavonic-Bulgarian script, copying of the major ecclesiastical books translated by Cyril and Methodius, and the creation of the most needed original theological works in the «new language». One of the disciples of Cyril and Methodius, Naoum, established here the new Old-Bulgarian alphabet - the so-called Cyrillic alphabet (the basis of present-day Bulgarian letters), of which the other main follower of the two brothers, Clement of Ochrida, was claimed the author.

He also founded another monastery by the same name - St. Panteleimon - near Ochrida, yet another School of literature of no lesser importance or fame than the Preslav one. It is rightly considered a genuine Old-Bulgarian university:

3,500 students were educated here in the course of seven years. Together with the men of letters and with the students from Naoum's Monastery on the Ochrida Lake which still bears its name, they created a wealth of canonical literature. Examples of it are the Codex Assemani (a masterpiece of calligraphic art and decoration, kept today in the Vatican Library), the Codex Zographensis and Codex Marianus, and the Psalterium Sinaiticum. The instructive and laudatory orations written by Clement are also among the peak achievements of the Ochrida School of literature.

However, as time went by, the original «state-literary» character of the earliest Bulgarian monasteries was changed; they increasingly turned into places for a true escape from life. Political, social and ideological conditions encouraged seclusion which, during the 10th century, yielded the national Saint John of Rila, the founder of another sacred abode - the Rila Monastery. The popular worship of St. John of Rila had provided for centuries a strong impetus to the patriotic strivings and creative inspiration of men of letters and painters.

Like all other buildings, the monastery churches and premises of the *First Bulgarian State* (681-1018) bear the impact of Byzantian architecture. This does not mean, however, that Bulgarian builders blindly copied upon Byzantian architecture. Bulgarian architecture and pictorial art are marked by one basic distinguishing feature: democratism.



Bulgarian architects were more inclined to follow local traditions rather than to adhere unconditionally to the new trends and fashions set by the powerful but hostile neighbour. The majority of monastery churches from that time are three-nave stone and brick basilicas of the type built by the Christians in the Bulgarian lands three centuries before the official conversion to Christianity. The most significant monument of monastery construction - the Grand Basilica in the so-called Prince Boris Monastery in Pliska (built on an area of 2,920 sq.m.; 99 m long and 29.5 m wide) has a number of features that bear no resemblance to Byzantine architecture. The rich sculptural and architectural decoration of the monastery churches near Preslav is also at variance with the stern and bare brick walls of Byzantine buildings.

The local purely, specific features of monastery architecture became even more vividly manifest at the time of the *Second Bulgarian State* (1185 - 1396). Its first rulers - the brothers Assen and Peter, and their dynasty, embarked on a large-scale construction of churches and monasteries. The financial possibilities and the legal rights of the monastic brotherhoods expanded; they became self-governed economic and administrative entities, not subordinate either to the State or even to the central religious authority.

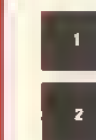
Many of the construction fragments from Pliska and Preslav were transferred to the palaces, churches and mona-



steries of the new capital city of Veliko Turnovo. Old local architectural models were revived. The search for an original signature led to the emergence of a Bulgarian sculptural and colour decoration, typical of the time, which reached virtuosity in some churches in Turnovo and Nessebur.

The *Turnovo School of Painting* was set up; it was one of the most impressive independent schools of painting of the Eastern Orthodox Church, and within the broader framework of Byzantine culture. The first person to study it, the Russian Andrei Grabar, defined it as a new style, with particular stress to the portrait and psychological individualization of the images, and to a higher degree of reality in the portrayal of human state and experience. Perhaps the most perfect expression of the achievements of the Turnovo School are the frescoes in the Boyana Church dating from the mid-13th century. Among the works preserved in the monasteries to this day are the murals in the chapel of Hrel'yo's Tower at the Rila Monastery, and in the so-called «Church» of the Ivanovo rock churches above the Roussenski Lom River.

During the reign of one of the most powerful rulers of the Second Bulgarian State, and one of the most generous pa-



1. Rila Monastery - icon - 19th century
2. Rila Monastery - St. Lucas Ossuary - mural





trons of the Bulgarian monasteries, Tzar Ivan Alexander (1331-1371), two monasteries were built near the capital of Veliko Turnovo which, in keeping with tradition, gave shelter to the greatest men of letters in the Bulgarian Middle Ages. They founded two Schools which played a historic role in the development not only of our own literature: the Kilifarevo School of Theodosius of Turnovo (ca. 1300-1363) at the Holy Virgin Monastery, and the Turnovo School of Euthymius of Turnovo, later Bulgarian Patriarch (ca. 1325-1401), at the Holy Trinity Monastery. The two Schools originate from each other. Theodosius of Turnovo created a genuine «university» for men of letters and translators, while his disciple Euthymius carried out a historic reform as a result of which the Old Bulgarian language and spelling were regulated in a uniform and orderly system. The School of Euthymius also created unsurpassed works of calligraphy and pictorial art, like the transcript of the Manasses' Chronicle, now kept at the Vatican Library, Ivan Alexander's Four Gospels, now in



1. Rila Monastery - the museum - icon of St. Arsen - 13th century
2. Rila Monastery - gold-lettered charter of Tzar Ivan Shishman
3. Rila Monastery - the museum - a manuscript
4. Rila Monastery - Orlitsa Cloister - the narthex



the British Museum, and the Tomichev Psalter, now in Moscow's Museum of History. The Kilifarevo and Turnovo Schools were not the Second Bulgarian State's only centres of literary activity. Writers, translators and calligraphers worked in nearly all larger Bulgarian monasteries. Their tasks were primarily purely practical; at that time, the monasteries were the main, if not the only organizers and implementers of education. Every larger monastery had its own school; besides primary education, a second, higher level was also introduced in some of them, mainly for those who had chosen to become monks. Not a single monastery would accept an illiterate person as a member of the brotherhood. Sooner or later, nearly all monks were engaged in educational activity. Besides compulsory church literature, secular texts were also studied in many monastic schools which shows that their tasks were far from restricted to the training of future clerics alone. Ottoman domination halted this upward development. All monasteries in Eastern Bulgaria to Veliko Turnovo, nearly all in the districts of Plovdiv, Sofia and the south-western regions were destroyed. The attempts at fully assimilating the Bulgarian nationality were to continue for centuries. In just one year - in 1657 - 218 churches and 33 monasteries were wiped out from the face of the earth, in a small region in South Bulgaria. Surviving boyars, clerics and enlighteners, and later - merchants and craftsmen, diligently

strived at saving the strongholds of the Bulgarian spirit: the monasteries. With their own means they restored and decorated the ruined temples and, whenever possible, built new ones or expanded and enlarged the monastery buildings. The illustrious chronicle of the donors-builders, restorers and donors of the Bulgarian monasteries - never ended throughout the centuries of Ottoman bondage. Around the gates and on the church walls, one can see the names, and occasionally also the figures, of people of all social strata but with one thing in common - patriotism. The spiritual link between the Bulgarian people and their monasteries became increasingly deeper and more intimate.

As early as in the 15th century, monasteries resumed both their literary and their pedagogical activities. They bred the first teachers of the enslaved Bulgarian people that no longer figured on the geographical map. At the beginning, the students were only taught reading, writing, calligraphy and divine service, in order to enable them to take holy orders more quickly, and thus be able to teach in turn. Children were also accepted, who were trained as village teachers and clergymen. Gradually, the network of monastery schools expanded, the standard of



1 and 2. Troyan Monastery - murals



schooling was raised, and the system of teaching became more sophisticated.

*The Bulgarian National Revival period* (18th-19th century) found a deeply rooted public tradition in the enlightenment activities of the monasteries which were now given a fresh impetus. The schools were often founded beyond the monastery walls. At Rakovitsa Monastery, the monks transgressed all religious restrictions, and opened the first secular school in North-West Bulgaria.

The process of democratization, of breaking through religious sectarianism, of affiliation with the national cause, was particularly manifest in the development of art in the monasteries mainly in the National Revival period.

Directly dependent on political, ideological and economic factors, *architecture* recovered slowly and with difficulty. Until the start of the 18th century, all new monastery churches were more or less of the same type: single-nave and vaulted, lacking exterior decoration, belfry and dome, at times partially underground. The self-taught masters who had replaced mediaeval architects repeated the old construction types and styles with the relentlessness of a national consciousness unwilling to submit.

Its highest creative expression was to be found in the 19th century, a time of changes in the nature of the despotic system and of the economic, spiritual and cultural upsurge of the Bulgarian people. A great



number of monastery churches were expanded or restructured, one-nave churches were enlarged with solid, up to one-metre-thick walls, with cupolas and belfries, and the old decorative elements on the facades were brought back to life. Complete unity between exterior and interior monumentality was achieved in some of the buildings. In many of the monasteries, model churches of creative freedom and liberated consciousness were erected.

The talented architect and builder Nikola Fichev (Kolyo Ficheto), the master of Bulgarian Baroque, worked during that period. His sources of inspiration were many and varied. The Lopoushna Monastery (Mihailovgrad District), for example, shows a definite though skilfully moulded influence of Gothic architecture.

One of the major achievements of Bulgarian construction during the National Revival period was the marked development of original town planning and composition, alongside with the fulfilment of a remarkable inner and outer harmony of the ensemble. These, in fact, were the distinguishing features of monastery architecture of that time. About a hundred large and small monasteries were restructured, completed or erected anew as complete ensembles, in perfect blend with sur-

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1 and 2. Rozhen Monastery - murals.



rounding nature, thus forming a harmonious unity. The landscape was never changed, on the contrary, the buildings were adapted to it. Another characteristic feature lending particular fascination to the Bulgarian monasteries was the use - without exception - of the so-called «double formation», i.e. massive external fortress walls and a broken-up, open system of verandahs into the inner courtyard. In some places, the monastery buildings were almost literally transferred local houses. The compactness of the ensembles, the search for a uniform, and yet characteristic silhouette, the adherence to a true relationship between the environment and man, the harmony of natural and added colours - these were not only the distinguishing features but also the rules and laws of the Bulgarian National Revival master builders.

Whereas the continuation of the traditions of the Second Bulgarian State was practically impossible in architecture, in the case of *pictorial art*, concealed behind unsightly walls and sagging roofs, these restrictions had no force. Already during the 15th century, in the restored or newly erected monastery churches, attempts were made to continue the natural development of pictorial art from the point when it was interrupted by the oppressors. There was a mark-



1,2,3 and 4 - Zemen Monastery - murals - 14th century



ed striving towards reviving the principles of the Turnovo-School of painting.

Political, social and living conditions had changed, however, and so had the consciousness of the creative artists. Art was subjected to other, strongly patriotic and much more democratic aims, which also determined the signature of the painters. It became much simpler, more accessible and more concrete. Popular imagination dictated the portrayal of biblical and Gospel scenes. At times these images and this signature are markedly, as if deliberately, primitivistic. The heroes of Christian mythology are often seen depicted with ordinary peasant faces or dressed in typical local national costumes, while the scenes of their life are turned into ordinary everyday scenes. The setting requisites and landscape are also taken straight out of the environment surrounding the artist.

At the end of the 16th and the beginning of the 17th century, the influence of the Athos style of painting made itself felt in a number of monasteries, mainly in the Sofia district.

When the first inscriptions with the names of artists, woodcarvers and builders started appearing on the walls of the monastery churches (around the mid - 18th century), the artistic processes had advanced substantially: different trends had formed, alongside with individual styles and signatures.

But not only this accounts for the break with anonymity.

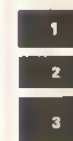


The new self-confidence was bred above all by national self-awareness. Art increasingly became the mouthpiece of patriotic, social and moral reflections and ideals, instead of purely religious feelings.

The churches of many monasteries were populated with the images of ancient Bulgarian saints and of hero-martyrs of the struggle for the preservation of faith and nationality, proclaimed and recognized as true saints of the people. Many of the biblical and Gospel scenes were imbued with contemporary social and moral content. The Iconpainter - the man of the people - clearly expressed his understanding of justice, and became the judge of his society and daily life. Greed, false patriotism, xenomania, laziness, social indifference, dishonesty - these were just some of the «deadly sins» to the Bulgarian National Revival artist.

*Three main Schools of painting* took shape towards the end of the 18th century: the Schools of Tryavna, Samokov and Bansko, which rather than being marked by different artistic principles, were centres for the most gifted painters of the time.

Legend links the creation of the *Tryavna School* of Painting to the darkest time of Ot-



1. Kilifarevo Monastery
2. Kilifarevo Monastery - altar detail
3. The Transfiguration Monastery



toman bondage - the 17th century - and to the figure of VIKENTIVS (Vitan) Karchev, who studied painting at Mt. Athos. From him descended a talented succession of icon-painters and woodcarvers who created remarkable works until the 19th century. The earlier VITANS still dabbled in mediaeval mysticism, irrespective of the light colouring and modern dress of the saints in their icons and murals, but the later offsprings of this artistic clan ventured as far as to depict deities with faces taken straight out of life, with portrait and psychological individualization, while retaining the rich ornamentation and decorativeness characteristic of their predecessors. Several generations of painters of the Zahariev family who worked in different and remote parts of the country, also belonged to this school.

The *Samokov School of Painting* was founded by Hristo Dimitrov (1745/50 - 1819) who studied icon-painting and painting at Mt. Athos and in Austria; he was famous for his rich collection of etchings, including works by Pollaiuolo, Guido Reni, Rembrandt and Dürer - a new information and culture which no doubt left marks on his own art and on that of his descendants. His son Zahari Zograph and his grandson Stanislav Dospevski brought the new artistic principles of Bulgarian National Revival art to perfection.

Zahari Zograph (1810 - 1853) became one of the founders of contemporary Bulgarian art. He left not only unparalleled

artistic masterpieces in the history of monastery painting but also vivid proof of the social and realistic way of thinking of the National Revival men.

Great fame was enjoyed both in his lifetime and posthumously by Stanislav Dospevski (1823 - 1878), a student of the St. Petersburg Academy of Art, a remarkable portrait painter and founder of Bulgarian secular painting. In many of monasteries, he painted icons which come very close to contemporary portraits.

Quite different from the Tryavna and Samokov Schools are the artistic methods, compositions and colour usage of the founder of the *Bansko School of Painting*, Toma Vishanov (Mollera) (end of 18th - start of 19th century), an artist beyond the accepted iconographic principles, remotely reminiscent of Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Bruegel (there is some evidence that Vishanov studied in Vienna).

Dozens of artists worked outside these schools, leaving on the monastery church walls evidence of the comprehensiveness of the new ideas and new creative language. In the Arapovo Monastery in South-east Bulgaria, Georgi Danchoy the Icon-Painter created the only patriotic cycles of the kind: ten original compositions from the life and work of Cyril and Methodius, and ten scenes from the life of St. John of Rila.

In this spiritual atmosphere, the ideological and artistic significance of the icon went considerably down, but never-

theless the finest masters painted icons for the monastery churches, imparting to them their new creative vision and conception of the world.

The Bulgarian monasteries preserve unique artistic proof of the rise of yet another art, that of *woodcarving*. Its flourishing during the National Revival period is by no means accidental. Having existed throughout the entire history of Bulgarian art - the fruit solely of popular imagination - it was now completely freed of religious dogmas, and gained unlimited possibilities of embodying personal images, tastes and strivings. Tryavna and Samokov once again became centres of this art, since many icon-painters were also adept at woodcarving.

A new art for the monasteries was *graphic art* which quickly gained immense popularity. Printing studios were set up in monasteries throughout the country. And more and more graphics were painted on patriotic themes.

Thus, during the National Revival period the monasteries were completely governed by the national spirit; their *participation in the national liberation struggles* was fully logical. The first page of this participation was recorded in the early years of bondage, by the Chiprovtsi Monastery which became a centre, and the participant, in a number of uprisings.

The final chord of the national liberation struggles, the most powerful and most tragic one, was sounded during the second half of the 19th century. At that time, the Apostle of

Freedom - Vassil Levski (1837-1873) travelled through the Bulgarian lands, setting up secret committees throughout the country in order to form a nation-wide revolutionary organization. Many of the monasteries became permanent and secure bases for Levski's mission - they provided him with shelter and protection, became the organizers and centres of the revolutionary preparations, and monks and abbots frequently headed the committees.

After Vassil Levski's death - he was hanged in Sofia on February 19, 1873 - his cause was continued by young revolutionaries from the strata of merchants, craftsmen and the intelligentsia, who organized the 1876 April Uprising. Again, it was the monasteries which sheltered and hid the leaders of the uprising. In fact, they became strongholds of the uprising and even formed combat detachments.

The reckoning was cruel, to say the least. Ten of the country's largest and best known «sacred abodes» were turned to ashes. A glorious age in the history of the Bulgarian monasteries ended tragically.



# THE RILA MONASTERY





## A SACRED PLACE

The introduction to the *Rila Monastery* could well start with the words of the first Bulgarian historian, Paissii of Hilendar, recorded in 1762 in his *Slav-Bulgarian History*:

«Of all the Bulgarian glory when there were so many large monasteries and churches in Bulgaria earlier, the Lord has left only the Rila Monastery to exist in our times... It is of great use to all Bulgarians. Therefore, it is the duty of all Bulgarians to guard it, and to give alms to the sacred Rila Monastery...».

The chronicle of this monastery reflects the entire history of the Bulgarian State and the Bulgarian people, the defence of their spiritual and cultural nature.

The monastery was founded by John of Rila in the 10th century as a colony for hermits. Later it became one of the centres of early mediaeval culture. It declined during the 11th century, but with the foundation of the Second Bulgarian State great care was taken of it. The vicissitudes of time forced its location to be changed on several occasions. It has been destroyed by fire, and abandoned by the monks. Its presentday place, 119 km south of Sofia, is the one in which it stood during the 14th century, when the protosebast Dragovol Hrelyo settled in the monastery as an independent ruler. In 1335, he built the five-storey defence tower, topped by the Transfiguration Chapel, fragments of whose murals can still be seen today. By the end of the 14th century, the Rila Monastery had turned





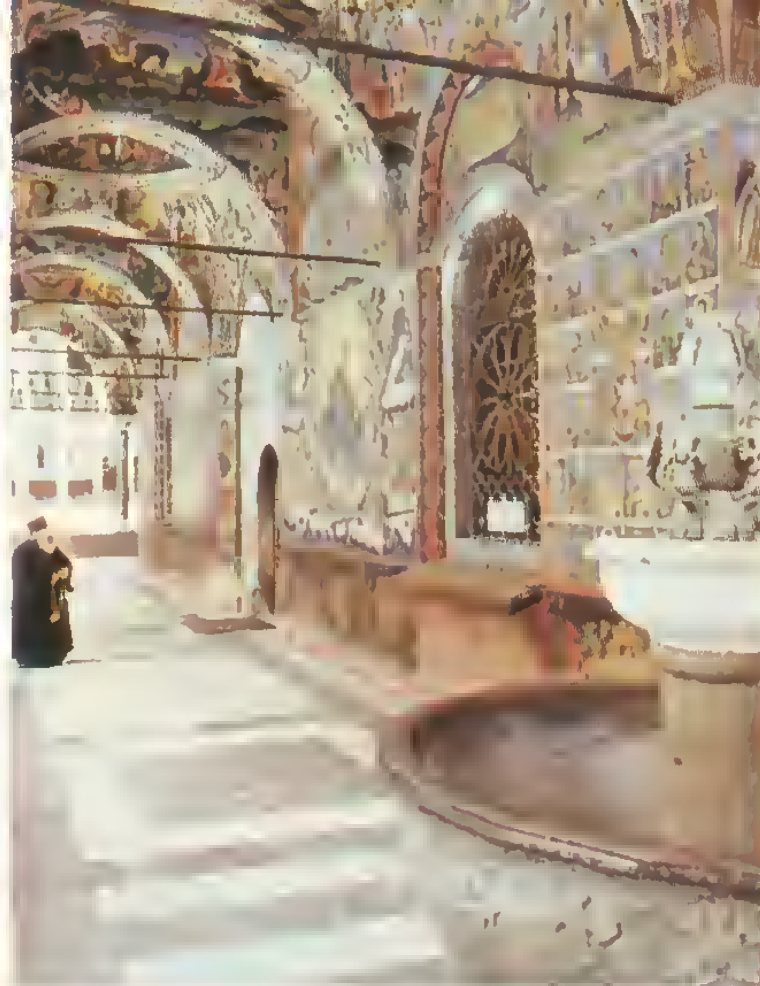
into a powerful feudal entity, with many villages, lands and properties (Tsar Shishman alone, the last Bulgarian ruler, donated it over twenty villages in different districts).

The monastery's unquestionable authority influenced the Turkish sultans who confirmed the rights granted by the Bulgarian kings by special firmans. Irrespective of this, the Monastery was devastated around the mid-15th century. It started rising again after the relics of John of Rila were brought from Veliko Turnovo here in 1469 (passing through the whole of Bulgaria as a nationwide patriotic procession). The fate of the Monastery became the concern of the entire Bulgarian nation.

A new centre was needed for the cultural life, which had declined or was transferred abroad. Many of the time's most outstanding men of letters gradually started gathering in the monasteries. The first links with Russian monasteries were established. A charter of Tzar Ivan the Terrible, kept today at the Monastery Museum, allowed the Rila monks unlimited access to the Moscow Principality.

The Rila Monastery was burned and pillaged on several occasions. The construction of the present-day monastery buildings, which stretched over thirty years, started in 1816, with means collected from the entire people. The courtyard façades offer one of the most perfect use of the verandahs system which, in contrast to their original use on Mt. Athos, lent very much warmth and cosiness to the place.

The large monastery kitchens



**НАЧАЛО ДІЯКОНИСТВА**  
**ИСПОЛНИХСЯ ЖЕ ПРЕ НАЧИННАТЕЛНОМУ, ПСА-**  
**МЪ ИЗ ШІДЪ ДІАКОНЪ СЪВЕРНОЮ СТРАНОЮ**  
**ИСТАВЪ НА ОБИЧНОМУ АУКЦИОНУ**



are located in the northern wing, and are a unique example of building and architecture: a 24-metre cone passing through all floors by means of ten rows of arches topped by a small cupola.

The Holy Virgin main church was built from 1834 to 1837 in the place of the old burned-down church. It is a combination of the old three-nave basilicas with the cruciform churches of Mt. Athos and the Italian cupola churches, (all these types were known to the Rila monks who provided the master with a complete construction plan). Normal church size was enlarged by the three apses, two galleries and two chapels.

The interior is extremely impressive. The murals were painted between 1840 and 1848 by some of the finest artists of the time: Ivan Nikolov The Iconpainter, Kosta Vallyov, Zahari Zograph, Dimiter Zograph and his sons - all from Samokov, Dimiter Mollerov from Bansko and his son Simeon. The icons of the main altar were painted by Ivan Obrazopissov from Samokov. The twenty donors' portraits in the church mark the beginning of Bulgarian secular painting, of realistic portraits.

Thus the Rila Holy Virgin Church became an example of the new trend which revived 19th century religious painting. This gallery of art was enriched by the murals in the churches and chapels outside the monastery: St. Lucas, Virgin's Shroud, The Assumption of St. John of Rila - above his grave, the church of the Orlitsa cloister, and the graveyard church. Some of them feature



another two of the main individual styles of the time: of Toma Vishanov and Nikola Obrazopissov, founder of the Bulgarian genre painting.

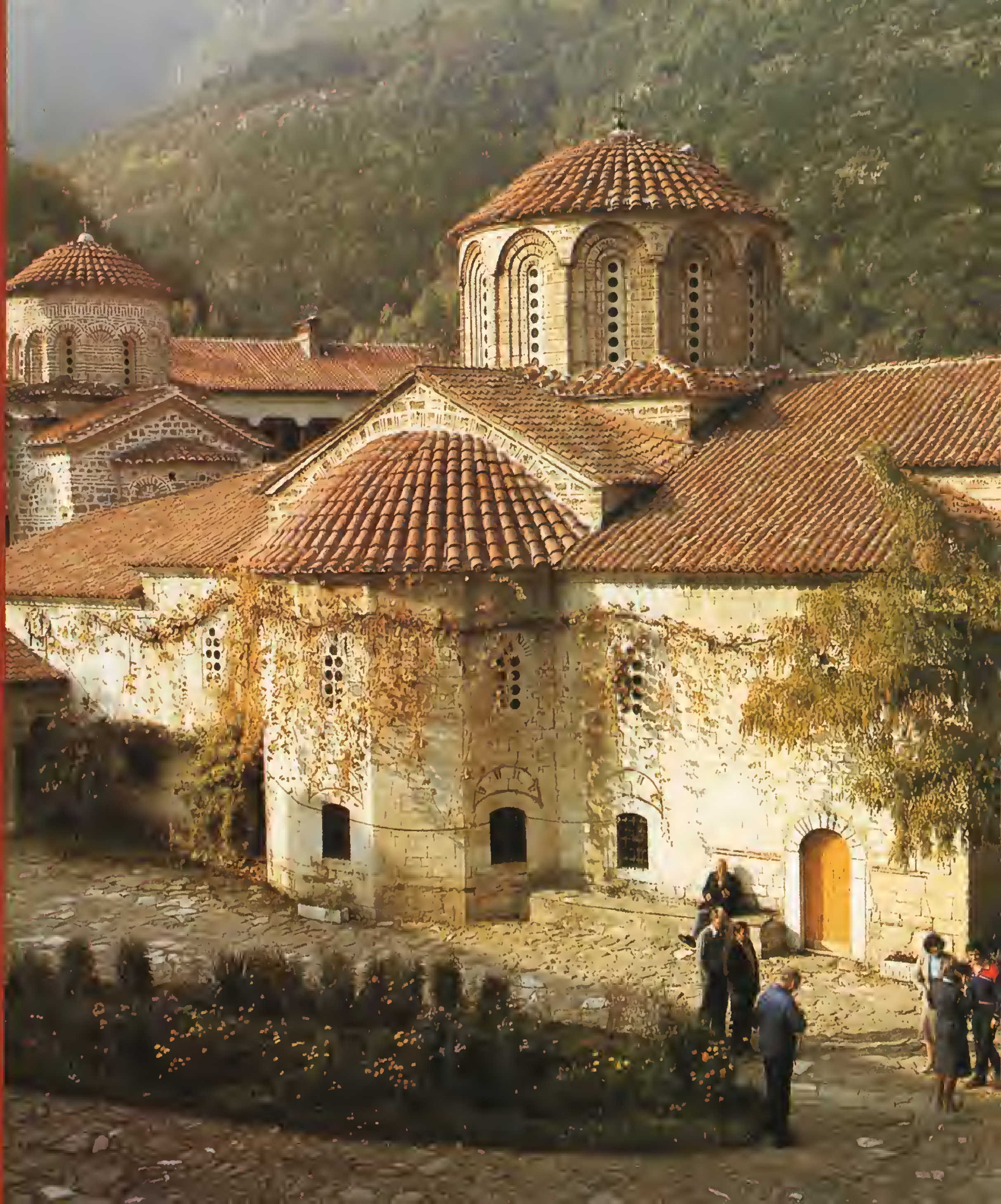
Thirty-six figural scenes, the figures of the Old Testament Kings, apostles martyrs, an exceptionally rich ornamentation of flowers, birds and stylized figures - this, in short, is the «subject-matter» of the main carved altar of the Holy Virgin Church fashioned by four masters over a period of five years.

Stunningly carved is the entrance gate of the already existing church of Protosebast Hrelyo, preserved today in the monastery's museum of history. The museum also contains a multitude of gold and silver church plates, collections of coins, weapons, jewelry, gold-weave materials and embroidery. A truly unique masterpiece is the carved cross of the Monk Raphael worked over a period of twelve years. The library's 16,000 volumes include 134 manuscripts from the 15th to 19th century, numerous incunabula and documents. The donations received from all parts of the country do, in fact, represent a very rich ethnographic collection - a national collection of works of arts and crafts. Retaining the names of the donors and the exact date of donation, they represent an original chronicle of the national consciousness, of those pure patriotic feelings and hopes which were inspired throughout centuries in every Bulgarian by the Rila Monastery - the country's largest spiritual and cultural temple.





# THE BACHKOVLO MONASTERY





### THREE AMONG THE TOP

*The Bachkovo Monastery*, erected in a magnificent locality along the reaches of the Asenitsa River (29 km south of Plovdiv), ranks second after the Rila Monastery both with regard to size, and to architectural, artistic and literary significance.

Its history was a turbulent one. It was founded by the Georgian Grigorii Bakuriani in 1083. A special decree stipulated that it was to be a self-governing body inhabited by some 50 Georgian monks at the most. Almost immediately after its foundation, the monastery turned into a wealthy landowner, its properties stretching as far as Salonika.

In 1344, Tsar Ivan Alexander established his rule over the Rhodopes, populated the monastery with Bulgarians, and generously donated to it. His full-length portrait stands next to the figures of Bakuriani and his brother Apassii in the narthex of the upper floor of the ossuary - the only building remaining from the mediaeval monastery after its destruction in the 16th century, standing alone in the woods today, apart from the new «complex».

The monastery's biography is inevitably reflected in the architectural face of the ossuary. Its general idea is foreign to old Bulgarian art, and is clearly influenced by Syrian and Armenian-Georgian building. At the same time, the construction of parallel rows of stones and bricks was unknown there, and that is the construction method of Pliska





and Preslav. The preserved murals on two floors are a valuable document of an age that has left us with fairly few artistic testimonies.

Painted during the 11th and 12th centuries, in all likelihood by two artists, the murals are the fruit of an aristocratic art, of the monumental-spiritualistic style of the time when the theocratic system of Byzantine imperial rule was most powerful: stern and absorbed figures, foreign to all worldly things, forceful and severe drawing, enamel gleaming colour.

Spared during the first wave of enslavement, Bachkovo Monastery became the «prison» of the last Bulgarian Patriarch Euthymius, who was exiled here, where he continued his great literary work. The wave of Mohammedanization destroyed the monastery, but by the end of the 16th century it was fully restored. The large refectory was built in 1601, the main church of The Assumption - in 1604. Thanks to the special benevolence of the Greek Patriarchate, the church became the only monumental (12 × 22 m, cruciform, three-apsed) cultic building in the Bulgarian lands prior to the National Revival period. The figures depicted in the church's first murals (1643) - probably the work of Athos painters - stand apart from the then prevailing democratic artistic trend; they are characterized by solidity, immobility and schematism. An interesting proof of the cultural level of the monastic brotherhood are the murals in the refectory displaying the upright





figures of the ancient philosophers Aristoteles, Aristophanes, Diogenes, David, Sophocles and Anaximenes.

Bachkovo Monastery was one of the most significant spiritual and literary centres of the National Revival period. It was a frequent venue of mass pilgrimages. In 1837, the decision was taken for a new church to be built: St. Nikola, which entered the annals of Bulgarian art. Its murals, completed in 1840, were the first documented work of the great National Revival artist Zahari Zograph. This is where you will also find the first self-portrait of the Bulgarian artist: above the heavenly regions of Doomsday, the first true genre compositions and realistic landscapes, the first paintings with a frank social content (the presentation of Plovdiv's notables among the sinners in hell), influenced by concrete topical reasons (for example, the refusal of these notables to open a Bulgarian school in their town).

The murals, old icons from different periods, the manuscripts and incunabula with artistic facings, as well as the many objects linked with church crafts, turned Bachkovo Monastery into one of the richest galleries of old Bulgarian art.





# THE TROYAN MONASTERY





The *Troyan Monastery*, is known above all for the creative work of Zahari Zograph who painted both the exterior and the interior (a rare practice for the time) of the main church built in 1835, 7 km from the town of Troyan. It is a fine example of the impact of the popular conception of the world and the influence of housing architecture on religious construction. Here, Zahari Zograph repeated the social and moral «experiments» in religious painting (the compositions *Doomsday* and the *Wheel of Life*), left his second self-portrait signed with amazing self-confidence in spite of the Ottoman bondage, and painted the figures of Bulgarian and Russian saints. Besides, he painted a completely secular group portrait of the monastic brotherhood in the refectory - something highly unusual for the time.

A chronicle dates back the foundation of the monastery in the year 1600; nothing but the throne stone of the church remains from that time. The Troyan Monastery belongs completely to the Bulgarian National Revival period. Eminent men of letters worked here during the mid-18th century, and a School was also founded. The patriotic mission turned into a tradition. In 1872, Vassil Levski set up here a secret revolutionary committee, which was joined by all the monks headed by the Father Superior Macarius. Four years later, the monastery became a citadel of the 1876 April Uprising.

Fortunately, most of the great works of old and National Re-



vival art have survived. The iconostasis of the main church made in 1839 is a masterpiece of woodcarving. Amazing in its originality, is the much earlier (1794) carving of the holy altar gates in the St. Nikola Chapel. The icons introduce us once again to the best known National Revival artists: the Samokovians Dimiter Zograph and Nikola Obrazopisov, Tryavna's Simeon Tsonyuv, Dossyu Koyuv, Koyu Tsenyuv, Theodossius Koyuv Vitanov. Particularly valuable among the multitude of manuscripts and incunabula are the so-called Troyan Homilies of the 17th century. The monastery's «printery» in which fine graphic works, including many landscapes, were made, was widely known.





# THE ROZHEN MONASTERY





*Rozhen Monastery*, situated far to the south in the Pirin area, 6 km from Melnik, is the only monastery restored during the first centuries of Ottoman rule which has survived to this day. The present-day appearance of this old monastery (built by the Melnik ruler, despot Slav, during the 12th or 13th century) dates back to the 16th century. According to one inscription, the image of Christ Pantocrator together with the twelve apostles above the entrance gate of the Holy Virgin main church, was painted in 1597. Valuable monuments of 17th-century painting included the external southern wall (Doomsday, Jacob's Ladder), dated with an inscription from 1611, as well as scenes from the life of John the Baptist painted in 1622 in the ossuary. The inside walls in the naos, the narthex and chapel of the main church were painted in 1732, with a strong inclination for narration, as a result of which more than 150 subject-matters were illustrated. The abundance of figures of monks and hermits unknown anywhere else, many of them, probably historic personages, contemporaries of the unknown painter, is also typical.

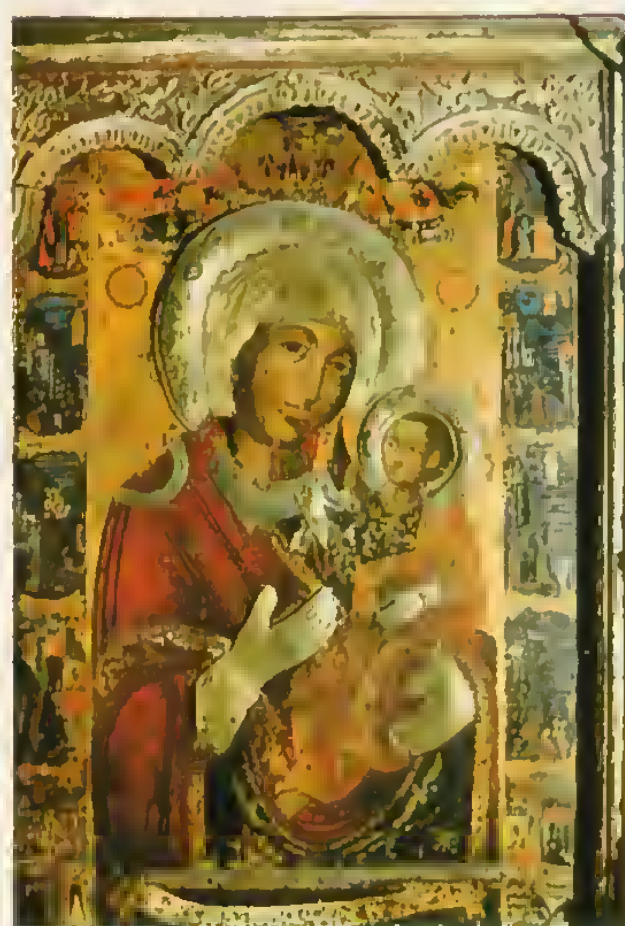
Rozhen Monastery owes its fame above all to its carved iconostases and lecterns. Some of them are extremely complicated compositions, both in intent and in actual execution, in which Biblical themes have given full scope to boundless imagination which reached the peaks of decorativeness.

Rozhen Monastery has left us with a treasure in yet another



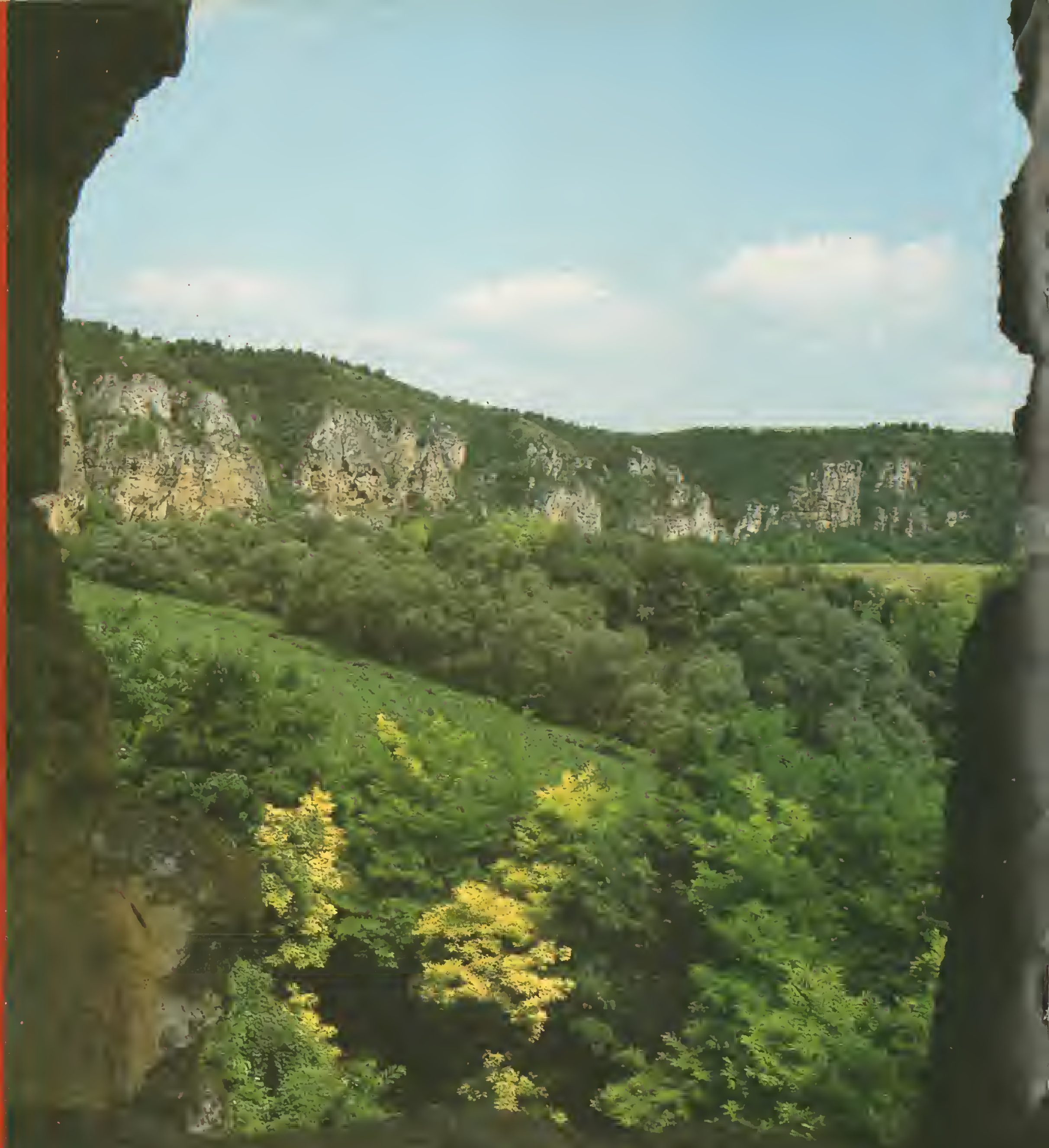


art - that of calligraphy. A unique work of the calligraphic school, which existed here as early as in the 14th century, is the manuscript «Interpretation of Jonah», taken in 1674 from the Constantinople Patriarch Dositheus, and kept today in the Holy Grave Church in Jerusalem.





# THE IWANOWO ROCK MONASTERY





## MASTERPIECES OF ARCHITECTURE AND ART

Bulgarian mediaeval art has not left us many monuments. The murals in the *Ivanovo Rock Monastery* have been preserved - as if by miracle - an example of the skill of the famous Turnovo School.

Hewn high into the rocks, 32 m above the waters of the Roussenski Lom River, near the village of Ivanovo, the monastery was the dwelling of hermits at the time of the widespread ideas of Hesychasm (14th century) - the religion of speech - lessness, asceticism and primitive perfection. Having imposed itself in Byzantium, Hesychasm came to Bulgaria at a turbulent time of social injustice and feudal wars. Quite naturally, thousands of its followers were attracted to a life of seclusion, settling in monasteries and cells in the rocks near Madara, Shoumen and Vratsa, above the Iskar River and the Yantra River near Veliko Turnovo.

The murals in one of the caves of the Ivanovo Rock Monastery, known simply as The Church, originally discovered by the Czech karel Skorpil, were probably painted at the time of the Ivan Alexanders' rule, when this recluse came most likely into being. This can be inferred from the large «portrait» of the ruler who also shared the ideas of Hesychasm, and was depicted in the «narthex» as the donor and benefactor of the monastery. In the low and narrow room, one is impressed by the unusually large number of the scenes and images, grouped in



separate compositions of rather limited size -  $1.20 \times 1.50$  m. Among them is also the earliest descriptive thematic narrative in Bulgarian art - the life of St. Gerassim, traced consistently and in detail.

Despite the purely technical difficulties, the mediaeval artist had succeeded in observing real and accurate proportions. The credo of the Turnovo School of Painting is clearly evident here. Soft and gentle colours have been used to paint exquisite figures who, at the same time, are also imbued with the kind of dramatism which is not typical of Byzantine art. Dramatic feelings emanate from the faces and figures which are alive and «worldly» very much. The poses and actions are quite natural, invariably subjected to an impetuous striving. This movement, leading to expression, lends occasionally a very interesting assymetricity to the portrayal. The artist worked freely, unrestricted by canons, following his own interest and taste. The murals abound in antique motive - nude caryatids, columns atop lions, masks. They are an example of the revived attention towards antiquity and its culture, which in the 14th century renewed the whole of Eastern Christian art.

Recently, another «church» with mural fragments was discovered in the large monastic colony in the rocks near Ivanovo. The paintings are assumed to date from still earlier times - the rule of Ivan Assen II (1218 - 1241), and testify to the enviable skill of Bulgaria's mediaeval mural painters during that period.



# THE ALADIA ROCK MONASTERY





Another heritage of the wave of Hesychasm is the *Aladzha Rock Monastery* above Golden Sands resort (14 km from Varna). Hermits inhabited the monastery until the 18th century. It is assumed that they came here in the early spread of Christianity during the 4th century.

The «architecture» of Aladzha Monastery is much bolder and more complicated than that at Ivanovo. Two floors have been hewn into the calcareous rock linked by a wooden staircase «mounted» in a cylindrical groove. The lower floor contains the church (11 m long, 7 m wide and 2 m high), several rooms and cells; the second floor contains a chapel and other small cells. Little remains of the murals in the church and the chapel. Painted probably during the 14th century, they belong to the Turnovo School.

Another similar monastery complex is hewn into the same rock, some distance away.





# THE ZEMLEN MONASTERY





Completely different from both the official Byzantine style and the other official Turnovo School, are the architecture and painting of the *Zemen Monastery*, founded during the 14th century. It is located above the Strouma River, 76 km south-east of Sofia. According to a donor's inscription in the St. John the Theologian Church, in 1354, the ruler of the Velbuzhd Principality, Despot Deyan, enlarged the church of the already existing monastery, decorating it with murals. A solid stone building, it was the only one to survive the monastery's ravaging and depopulation after Bulgaria's subjection to Ottoman rule. It was not restored until the 19th century.

The builders probably changed the entire exterior of the church in keeping with their ideas and tastes. Such as it remains today, the Zemen church is an absolute exception to the whole of Bulgaria's mediaeval architecture: a cubic building, with three semi-cylindrical apses with equal height, reaching up to the roof cornice which unites them in a single group. The roof - a four-wall squashed pyramid with a cupola atop a cylindrical drum, decorated by two rows of blind arches - is unique in the entire Balkan Peninsula. The facades which are broken up only plastically - by means of blind arches and lacking colour effects - complete the harsh original appearance. A strange blend is achieved with the impact of the inside murals - also harsh, somewhat crude, as if deliberately archaic.



With few parallels in contemporary painting, they continued the traditions of the pre-iconoclastic period in the Eastern Orthodox art. Archaism is visible both in the themes of the religious scenes and in the means of portrayal, the presentation of architectural details, the use of light and space. The colours are saturated and strong, lacking nuances; the figures, the folds of the garments, the ovals and features of the slightly individualized faces are outlined with thick, hard contours. The aim was to create a solid and down-to-earth image - the Biblical heroes are calm and strong persons, alien to either extasy or asceticism. The only exception is the figure of John of Rila, one of the earliest portraits of the saint.

The portraits of donors Despot Deyan and his wife are considerably individualized, hinting at drawing from nature. A similar trend is observed only in the portraits of Sebastocrator Kaloyan and his wife Desislava in the Boyana Church (1259). The face of the ruler's wife has a kind of simple living beauty, and elements of folk embroidery are depicted on the headcloth showing below her crown. The Zemen master also had a particular weakness for folk-style details which he skilfully depicted. Finally, as a vivid proof of his imagination, creative freedom and striving for originality, is the scene «Forging of the Nails» which does not exist either in gospel texts or in painting - Bulgarian or foreign, nor even in apocrypha. It is the fruit of the imagination of



the Zemen artist alone.  
All this makes this monastery  
a rare monument of original  
mediaeval folk art, of that  
marked trend in religious  
painting which Andrei Grabar  
called «democratic trend».





# THE KREMIKOVTSI MONASTERY





We will find it, turned into a common artistic language, in the first centuries of Ottoman domination when attempts were made in the monastery churches to continue in the pictorial traditions severed by the tragic events. The strongest of these traditions was that of the Turnovo «royal» School. In this way, the artistic process came to suffer internal contradictions.

This is very clearly visible in the murals of *Kremikovtsi Monastery* near Sofia. It was founded during the 14th century, again probably due to Tzar Ivan Alexander, when 14 monasteries known as the «Sofia Mount Athos», were erected around Sofia. Destroyed in 1332, it was among the first monasteries to be restored later - in 1493 the buildings were restored, and St. George's Church erected, the sole survivor today. At that time its murals were painted, including one of the earliest donor's portraits during Ottoman rule: the Boyar Radivoi is depicted with his wife and two children, alongside with the Sofia Metropolitan Calevit who also contributed to the restoration of the monastery. The group is escorted by the patron - St. George: a unique genre painting, the result of the painter's patriotic desire to bring the donor's personalities closer to the saints, a privilege formerly enjoyed only by royal persons.

On the outside, the church is small and insignificant, like all the «semi-legal» buildings of those dark times. As a compensation, the murals (partially preserved today)





turned the interior into a glittering gallery. The spirit is here alive of the aristocratic Turnovo School, even if the artist was unable to remain completely unaffected by the popular way of thinking and the ideas which had come to influence art. The colouring is respectfully solemn, the drawing elegant, to the point of exquisiteness, the figures are lofty and exalted. At the same time, St. Helena, the mother of Emperor Constantine, who introduced Christianity to Rome, is depicted with an ordinary white headcloth borrowed from the Shoppe national costumes. The Doomsday scene is painted on the western wall. This is one of its first portrayals in Bulgarian religious painting, later to become the ground for social and moral interpretations and criticism. Here we can see the beginning of a drawing closer to popular images.

The artists of the Kremikovtsi Church were no blind imitators of traditional methods. In the overall composition of the murals, they introduced a new element which renewed the art of the time, and became traditional. This is the richly ornamented frieze of the waist-length figures of saints and martyrs, introduced for the first time, which separated the «classic upright saints» from subject scenes, diversifying and enriching the general picture. In the narthex where the murals speak of a different author's signature, and possibly also of later time, one is strongly impressed with the skill used in architectural decoration in a



completely realistic spirit. Depicted here are genuine urban landscapes, seemingly straight out of life, and many accurate everyday details. The former flatness of portrayal is substituted by a skilfully conveyed sensation of space and depth.

Kremikovtsi Monastery also contains some valuable examples of calligraphic art which was particularly perfected here during the 15th century, when the Sofia School of Literature was created and developed at Dragalevtsi, Kremikovtsi, Kokalyane, German and other monasteries. The so-called Kremikovtsi Gospel is an example of it.





# THE TRANSFIGURATION MONASTERY





The masterpiece of another age, of other principles in architecture and art, is the *Transfiguration Monastery*, erected 7 km from Veliko Turnovo in one of the picturesque gorges of the Yantra River. A world of much sun and vivacity greets us here.

The monastery suffered a turbulent fate. Legend links its creation to Queen Sara, Ivan Alexander's second wife, who made donations like her husband. The monastery, called Sara's Monastery for a long time, became one of the centres of the Turnovo School of Literature. It was burned to the ground when the capital of the Second Bulgarian State was taken; centuries had to pass before life was reinstated here, on top of the ruins. The monastery started its second existence only in 1825. A part of the buildings and the Holy Virgin Church were erected - a revival of the late 14th century Athos type of architecture, an absolute exception from the ideas and construction principles of the National Revival period. Construction of the second church - The Transfiguration - started in 1832. Later, the monastery became one of Vassil Levski's safest refuges. His closest associate, the organizer of the revolutionary preparations in the Veliko Turnovo area, the monk Matei Preobrazhenski, also dwelled here. Priest Hariton, later a leader of an armed detachment in the 1876 April Uprising, was also a disciple of the monastery.

The famous architect of the Bulgarian National Revival, Kolyo Ficheto, embarked on the construction of the new church. He created one of the



supreme examples of Bulgarian Baroque - a cruciform, three-apsed and dome-shaped building, with the impressive size of 8×24 m. This is where he also manifested his brilliant sense of town planning. He boldly put up the belfry opposite to the church located transversely in the yard, including it in the western wing of the housing quarters. He completed this incredibly harmonious ensemble completely adapted to the natural scenery, with the aid of every conceivable construction and building method known at the time. So as not to upset harmony with nature, the interlocked housing quarters begin from the east with one floor and end in the west with a three-storey wing which also includes the first church, the Holy Virgin. The three courtyards - the main, monastic and household one, united by Kolyo Ficheto's belfry - were laid out in this rectangle, although not clearly separated as elsewhere. A rich system of verandahs, tracery railing and a common one-metre roof which acts as a frieze of light and shade, complete the facade unity.

To complete this masterpiece of architecture, the Transfiguration Church was painted both externally and internally by Zahari Zograph. Some of the icons were also painted by him, others - by Stanislav Dospevski. The iconostasis was carved by Kolyo Ficheto - an amazingly frail lacework, while the altar in the underground chapel, now a church, was made by the famous Tryavna artist Vitan Koyuv.



# THE KILIFAREVO MONASTERY





## ALONG THE TRACKS OF HISTORY

*The Kilifarevo Monastery* has gone down in the annals of Bulgarian history as the «Second University of Mediaeval Bulgaria», following that of Clement of Ochrida's large School in Ochrida. It was founded between 1348 and 1350 upon the order of Tzar Ivan Alexander, 12 km south of Turnovo, for the purpose of providing shelter for the Hesychast and hermit Theodosius of Turnovo, a man of letters and an enlightener roaming the Bulgarian lands at the time. The monastery soon gathered writers, philologists, translators and calligraphers alongside with clergymen who spread Hesychasm, theologians and philosophers. Liturgical books and Byzantine chronicles were translated, volumes were compiled of the lives of Bulgarian, Serbian and Greek saints, and sermons were written against the different and numerous heresies. The Hesychastic principle that «the word is identical with the substance» was brilliantly realized in the perfect language form and the accurate translation, a skill which the biographer of Theodosius of Turnovo, the Byzantine Patriarch Calyst, was later to call a «divine gift». The culture and the depth of knowledge of these men of letters were remarkable: in their works, they freely quoted Thucydides, Plato, Homer and Aristoteles. Here studied Cyprianus, the future Metropolitan of Kiev and All Russia, an off-spring of the Turnovo boyar family of





Tsamblak, who reformed the Russian liturgical texts. The author of this reform - Euthymius, Theodosius of Turnovo's closest disciple - also worked here.

Destroyed during the onslaught of the Ottomans, the monastery was not restored until 1718. This is when the small Birth of Christ Church and the two chapels of John of Rila and of Theodosius of Turnovo, were built. In 1840, the monks called Kolyo Ficheto who restructured and enlarged the church (retaining only the altar wall and the two chapels) and raised the present-day spacious, although single-nave, domed church. Its rectangular plan distinguishes it from all other monastery churches of the time. Although more restrained and somewhat sterner than in some of his other works, the great master has attained an elegant external appearance with sparse decorations of blind two-step bays and a typically National Revival decorative frieze reminiscent of woodcarving.

Some of the murals in the old chapel of Theodosius of Turnovo have been preserved, providing an interesting document of 18th century art. One feels the freedom and confidence with which the unknown master worked, his sense of movement and the skill to convey the inner state of this movement through the position of the figures. Adapting himself to the small size and peculiar construction of the interior (without a northern wall), he allowed himself to upset the accepted



chronology of the Biblical scenes.

The most remarkable work of art here is again in the chapel: the old carved iconostasis, probably the work of Tryavna masters, fashioned with great imagination, seen above all in the figures of mythical monsters and beasts, with great sculptural talent, manifesting at the same time a perfect measure for decorativeness. Icons of some of the finest masters of the Tryavna School are preserved in the church and chapels. The famous icon of the life of John of Rila is also kept here.

Kilifarevo Monastery, repeatedly restored and reconstructed, has a complete, harmonious appearance, blending with the environment, which ranks it among the finest architectural ensembles of the Bulgarian National Revival period.





# THE DRYANOVŌ MONASTERY





Living strongly in the national consciousness of every Bulgarian, is the heroic and tragic destiny of the *Dryanovo Monastery*. In existence as early as in the Second Bulgarian Kingdom, it was subsequently destroyed and re-built on two occasions. It was restored in its present location - in the Dryanovo River gorge, 4 km away from the town of Dryanovo - in 1845. During their tours of Veliko Turnovo district, Vassil Levski and Matei Preobrazhenski chose it as one of the main bases of the revolutionary organization. During the 1876 April Uprising, Priest Hariton from the Transfiguration Monastery, the uprising's military commander in the area, Pêter Parmakov, and the teacher and poet Bacho Kiro Petrov, headed an armed detachment of 200 men who, pursued by the enemy, found shelter behind the walls of Dryanovo Monastery. Throughout nine days, they engaged in fierce battle before being crushed: the insurgents and monks were killed, the monastery burned to the ground. Only a part of the large stone church was spared.

Relics of the April epopee are preserved in the monastery museum today, along with some valuable icons.





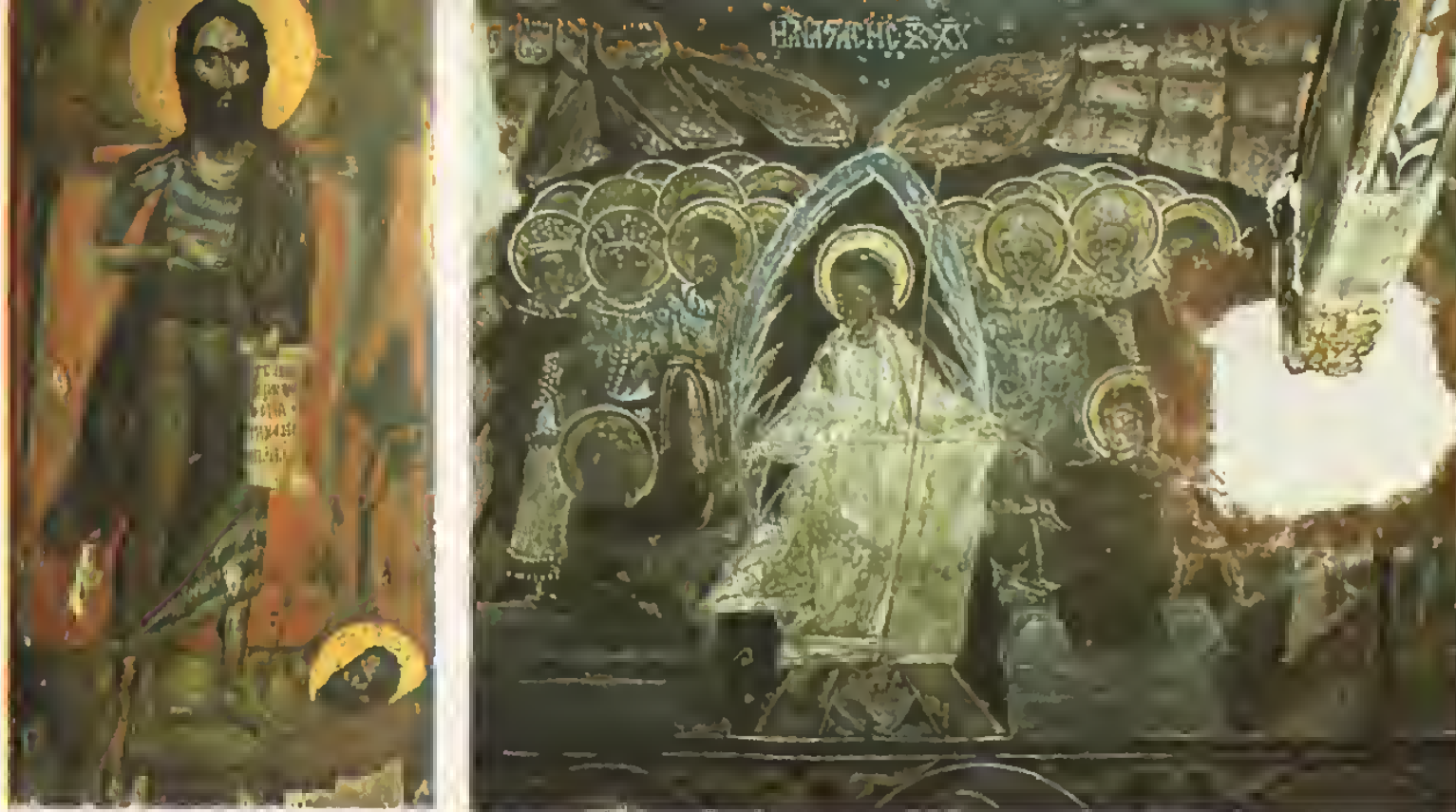
TWO MONASTERIES  
IN THE VILLAGE OF ARBANASSI  
ST. NIKOLA AND HOLY VIRGIN





There are two *monasteries in the village of Arbanassi*, 3 km from Veliko Turnovo - *St. Nikola* and *Holy Virgin*. Between the 16th century and its tragic devastation two centuries later the village - one of the wealthiest in pre-liberation Bulgaria, boasted a rich and unusual house architecture, the work of skilled masters from different parts of the country.

St. Nikola Monastery was part of the widespread religious construction under the Assen dynasty, the founders of the Second Bulgarian State. It was destroyed in 1393. Three hundred years later, in 1680, it was restored. The present-day monastery church, enlarged and restored on several occasions, dates from that time. Its artistic and historical value lies above all in the surviving murals in the St. Elija Chapel, probably dating from 1716: a monumental figure of Christ the Great Archangel, 12 scenes from the Holy Akathistos, and 6 scenes from the life of Christ. Even these suffice to show the exceptional character of the painting which seems to hide some mystery. It stems not only from the themes, some of which are rarely seen in the monastery churches of the time. The effective colouring and rich palette, the confidence in the portrayal of the human figures, the unusually varied architectural decoration reveal the hand of a master from a superior and more erudite school, possibly a guest from Mt. Athos or one of the highly esteemed foreign disciples



travelling in the country at that time. The filigree wooden iconostasis in the chapel, with its delicate and exquisite decorations, is another valuable treasure.

Though situated in the same village, the Holy Virgin Monastery suffered a different, though no less tragic fate. It is not known how it survived the attacks in 1393; it accumulated increasingly greater wealth before it was destroyed during the 17th century. In 1680, when the St. Nikola Monastery was restored, the local population also provided means for the erection of a new church in the place of the abandoned monastery. In 1716, the Troyan monk Danail erected living quarters, attracted monks to them, and thus revived the life of the monastery. Not for long, though - only until its utter defeat at the end of the century. Somewhat earlier, in 1762, the church was painted anew, but no proof remains of the authors of these murals. What has remained of them warrants the assumption that they, too, were painted by travelling artists - highly paid at the time, but quite affordable by the wealthy inhabitants of the village of Arbanassi.

At the Holy Virgin Monastery too, the Tryavna School has left valuable icons behind.





# THE KAPINOVO MONASTERY





The church of the *Kapinovo Monastery*, near the town of Elena, features an inscription of the year of its foundation on the cornice above the altar: 1272, under Constantine the Quiet's rule. Following repeated destructions and restorations of the monastery, the church was built in 1835 by two self-taught masters from Dryanovo. There is little to distinguish the single-nave, domeless building; the murals however include some of the most remarkable compositions in Bulgarian religious painting on the theme of Doomsday painted in 1845 by Joan Popovich from Razgrad, an artist not belonging to any school. It is quite rare for one to see a scene with so many participants, with such an exhaustive representation of the entire scriptural «personage», and with such detailed tracing of the theme and its elements.

On the comparatively small western entrance wall, the artist has manifested amazing composition skill, great imagination, inventiveness and personal interpretation. The dead rising from the graves, the poses and gestures of the sinners dragged by the Blazing River to Hell, depicted as a dragon, is reminiscent of the apocalyptic vision of Toma Vishanov from Bansko, insubordinate to the strict canons of pictorial art.

The present-day massive two-storey buildings were built in 1856. The outside walls are 1.5 m thick; their height which follows the natural curves of the ground, exceed 8 m in places. This is an eloquent

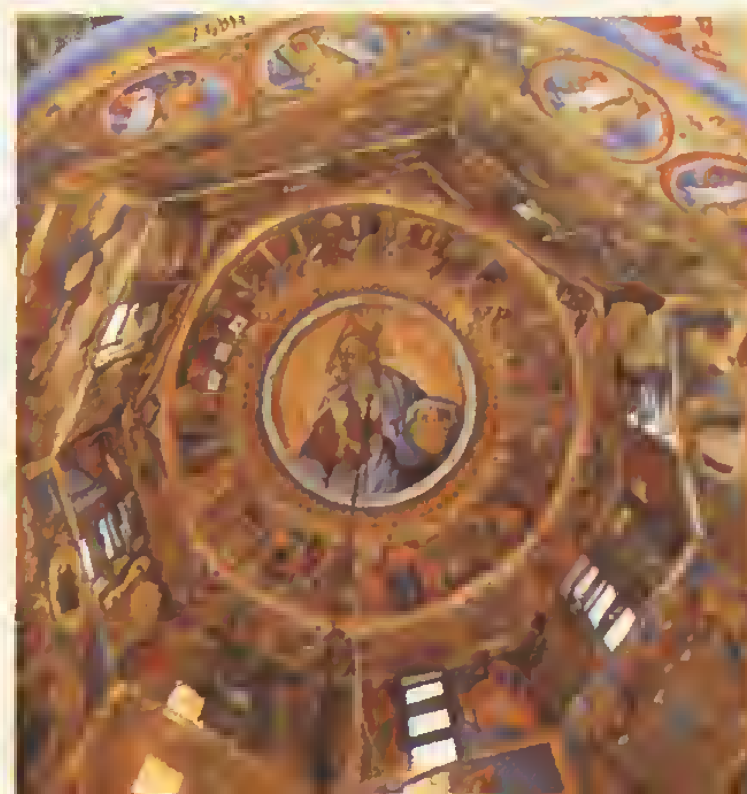


illustration of one of the construction principles of the Bulgarian National Revival period: resembling a mediaeval fortress from afar, from the inside the Kapinovo Monastery is picturesquely broken up and beautified with verandahs, eaves and staircases which serve to create a homely cosiness. At the time of the construction, the impressive entrance gate was crowned with the figures of the Slav enlighteners Cyril and Methodius. Later on, the portraits of the two donors were painted, with an inscription of gratitude, on the newly built chapel - The Presentation of the Blessed Virgin.

The national spirit never died here. In 1794, the Father Superior of the monastery became one of the great enlighteners, the classic of National Revival literature, Priest Stoiko Vladislavov, known later as Bishop Sophronius of Vratsa. He brought a copy of Paissii of Hilendar's *Slav-Bulgarian History* - a work which kindled the spark of national self-awareness. The «specialized» school for grammarians and priests, which was set up here in 1830, enjoyed great prestige.





# THE CHEREPISH MONASTERY





History links the name of Sophronius of Vratsa also with another monastery quite remote from the Kapinovo one - the *Cherepish Monastery*. Like all other Bulgarian monasteries, it also rises above a river - the Iskar, more precisely in its pass through the Balkans. Sophronius of Vratsa hid here twice: 1798-1799. The future author of the first Bulgarian autobiographical novel probably did not choose Cherepish Monastery by accident: it possessed one of the richest libraries. Throughout centuries, it was inhabited by men of letters, translators and calligraphers who have left us with such valuable works as the Cherepish Gospel of the 16th century, bound in 1612 with gold covers and depicting scriptural scenes; the Gospel of the Monk Danail, Jacob's Book of Apostles (both dating from the 17th century), and the Margarit collection of sermons and precepts compiled by Priest Todor of Vratsa in 1762.

The approximate date of the monastery's emergence is certified in writing: a deed recorded between 1390 and 1396 is kept today at Sofia's Church Historical and Archaeological Museum.

Some of the murals in the old church were possibly painted about the mid-19th century by Tryavna artists, but are badly damaged. The loss is somewhat compensated by the skilfully carved iconostasis and bishop's throne.





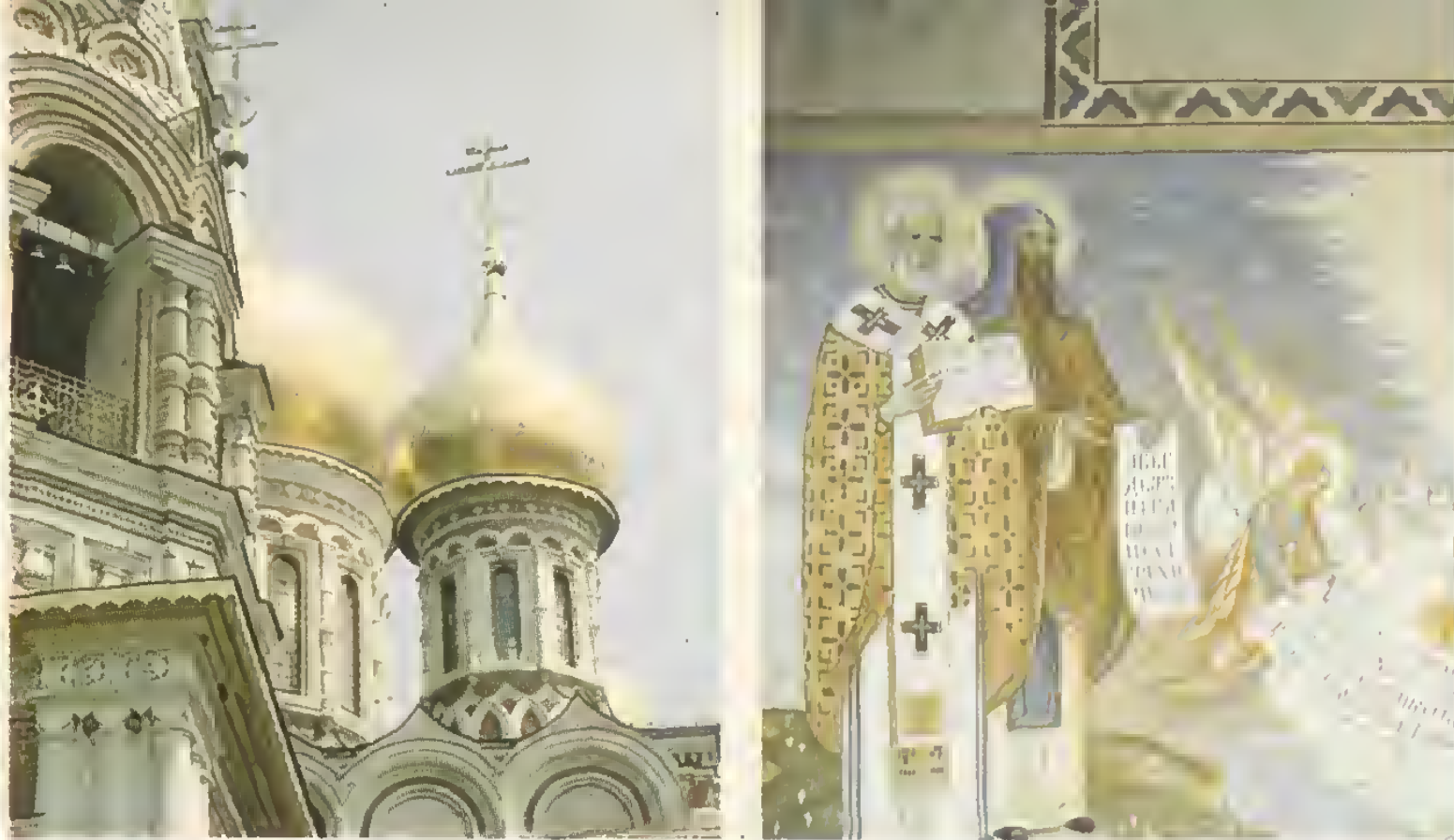
# THE SHIPKA MONASTERY





Part and parcel of our history is the *Shipka Monastery*, a symbol of an epoch-making event for Bulgaria - her Liberation from Ottoman rule, the final outcome of the 1877/78 Russo-Turkish War. The monastery, together with an impressive memorial church, was erected near the town of Shipka, near Kazanluk, below the famous Shipka Pass in the Balkan Range, where in the summer of 1877 the Russian troops and Bulgarian volunteers achieved the break-through which brought about the victorious outcome of the war. A year later, the All-Russian Committee headed by the mother of General Skobelev, Olga Nikolaevna, and Count N.P. Ignatiev, decided to build this church in memory of the historic victory. The means for its construction, which began in 1896 and was completed six years later, were provided by the Russian and the Bulgarian people. The names of the Russian soldiers and Bulgarian volunteers who died near Shipka and Kazanluk, are carved onto the 34 marble plates inside the church.

Architect A.I. Tomishko is a representative of the so-called «Old Russian Trend» in architecture, which revived the great Byzantine style in its Russian cathedral version of the 17th century. Similar examples of this architecture are the Russian Church and the Alexander Nevsky Memorial Church in Sofia. The Shipka Monastery is one of its exquisite, and at the same time monumental, «editions». Solemn elegance is also ema-



nated by the carved and gilded iconostasis made by the Russian architect Yagna. The altar icons were painted in the Russian Monastery St. Panteleimon in Mt. Athos, and were presented by its monks as a gift to the Shipka Monastery.

It stands by no means estranged in the overall panorama of Bulgarian monasteries. Just like them, it is more than just a place of worship.

The 120 monasteries preserved to this day are a living chronicle of Bulgaria's culture, creative spirit and national consciousness. They have been, and will be, a part of her thinking and of her mentality.









